

# Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Benefits All Children from Myanmar:

*Ethnic and Refugee Teachers possess necessary MLE Competencies*

Policy Brief

August 2017

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are 116 living languages in Myanmar (Lewis et al 2013). Currently the official language of oral and written instruction in all government schools is the national language: Myanmar Language. In many of Myanmar's ethnic minority communities the national language is only first encountered in schools and rarely used at home. An extensive body of literature demonstrates the benefits of Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) in promoting the learning of further languages. Continued advocacy for MTB-MLE must remain a priority area as Myanmar continues to have variable interpretations and varying degrees of implementation of the national language policy.

After a review of international literature regarding best practices in MLE classrooms, an MLE teacher competency framework was produced that incorporates 20 MLE teacher competencies, each with a 10-point rating scale. The result: a 200-point classroom observation tool that assesses a teacher's ability to use effective MLE methodologies. A study was conducted where this tool was piloted to observe 16 teachers working in areas under ethnic administration in Southeastern Myanmar as well as in the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. Leaders from the Following Ethnic and Refugee Education Service Providers assessed the MLE competencies of teachers: the Karen Education Department (KED), Rural Indigenous Sustainable Education (RISE), Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY), the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), the Karen Refugee Committee – Education Entity (KRC-EE), facilitated by World Education Thailand.

Education Service Provider	Number of Teachers Supported	Number of Students Supported	Geographic Areas Reached
KED & KTWG	11,095	175,611	Kayin (Karen) State, Mon State, Tanintharyi Division and Bago (Pegu) East
KNGY	101	7,012	Kayah, Shan, Naypyitaw and Kayin (Karen) State
MNEC	744	26,311	Mon State, Kayin (Karen) State and Tanintharyi Division
RISE	3,721	51,665	Northern, Southern and Eastern Shan State, Chin State, Kayin (Karen) State, Kachin State, Sagaing, Bago, and Tanintharyi Division.
KRCEE	1,048	22,569	7 Refugee Camps along the Thai-Myanmar Border

**Table 1.0 Scope and Scale Participating Education Service Providers**

Using the MLE teacher competency observation tool it was found that observed teachers demonstrated proficiency in both professional knowledge and professional skills related to multilingual education. Teachers described key concepts and objectives for learning of the primary curriculum for the grade level/s taught, engaged the students in the learning process through the use of a variety of learning activities, and utilized a variety of assessment methods to identify students' language levels and needs. The observed ethnic and refugee teachers exhibited MLE competencies to help children become more fluent and literate in the children's L2: Myanmar Language or English, depending on the service provider.

**In recognition of the rich cultural diversity of Myanmar, and in order to support all children from Myanmar to access education in a language they understand, a flexible pathway toward national recognition is required for teachers who possess MLE competencies.**



## INTRODUCTION

The current education reform in Myanmar, guided by the National Education Sector Plan (NESP), presents an opportunity for inclusive language policy to be drafted and implemented in order to preserve Myanmar's rich language tapestry. Ethnic Education Service Providers have ensured that Myanmar's languages are kept from extinction and indigenous knowledge is preserved from generation to generation. Significant awareness has been raised concerning the vast teacher shortage in Myanmar, however, a sufficient number of teachers exist –the shortage lies in teachers with government-recognized certificates. Ethnic and Refugee Service Providers employ thousands of teachers (currently unaccredited by the Myanmar Ministry of Education) currently working to fill this need.

*The strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling a child receives. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement.*

- Thomas & Collier, 2001

Many Ethnic Education Service Providers are using government curriculum within their schools, primarily in the secondary grades. In some cases, Ethnic Education Service Providers, such as the Karen Education Department (KED) and the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) have developed a local curriculum which includes local content, values, and culture. This curriculum is not accredited by the Myanmar Ministry of Education. Current national policy allows for mother-tongue language classes during school hours, however, this policy is implemented to varying degrees across different states and regions. The language of instruction in government schools is Myanmar Language, which acts as a significant barrier for students living in remote regions of Myanmar who grow up speaking one of the 100+ indigenous languages.

Additional support is required for such children in order to bridge the language gap. Locally trained teachers who are fluent and literate in the students' L1 as well as the national language represent an essential part of the solution as implementers of multilingual education. Curriculum in ethnic languages has been developed for

kindergarten, which represents a positive step towards promoting diversity, however, this curriculum is directly translated from the national curriculum, which has reportedly resulted in widespread inaccuracies<sup>1</sup>. The re-designed KG curriculum, whilst available in local languages, has received critique from local language and cultural committees on the basis that it does not promote local values and culture.

*"A critical problem is that in most countries, there are too few certified teachers from local language communities who have the level of fluency needed to use both languages in the classroom."*

- Malone & Malone, 2014

To ensure that sufficient quantities of teachers fluent and literate in ethnic languages are available, a flexible pathway is needed for teachers currently working at community and refugee camp-based schools who possess the necessary language abilities. To gain insight into the MLE competencies of such teachers, a pilot study was conducted to assess teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and practices, and values and dispositions using an MLE competency classroom observation tool. An MLE competency is defined as what a teacher *should know and be able to do in a classroom where multiple languages are written and spoken*.

The Multilingual Education (MLE) teacher competency classroom observation tool incorporates 20 competencies in 3 domains:

- A. Professional Knowledge and Understanding
- B. Professional Skills and Practices
- C. Professional Values and Dispositions

<sup>1</sup>Translated Textbooks Hinder Ethnic Language Education. The Irrawaddy. 20 July 2017.



## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The pilot study consisted of four research teams, made up of education personnel, teacher trainers, and experienced teacher education support staff, each possessing fluency in the L1 and L2 of the classes they observed. 16 teachers from three different ethnic groups were observed as follows:

- 4 S'Gaw Karen and Myanmar Language speaking teachers** from primary, secondary and high schools in Myanmar and supported by the Karen Education Department (KED) and the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG).
- 4 S'Gaw Karen, Myanmar Language and English speaking teachers** working in primary schools in a refugee camp supported Karen Refugee Committee-Education Entity (KRC-EE).
- 4 Mon and English Speaking teachers** from primary and middle schools supported by the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC).
- 4 Kayan and Myanmar Language speaking teachers** from primary schools in rural Kayah region supported by Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY).

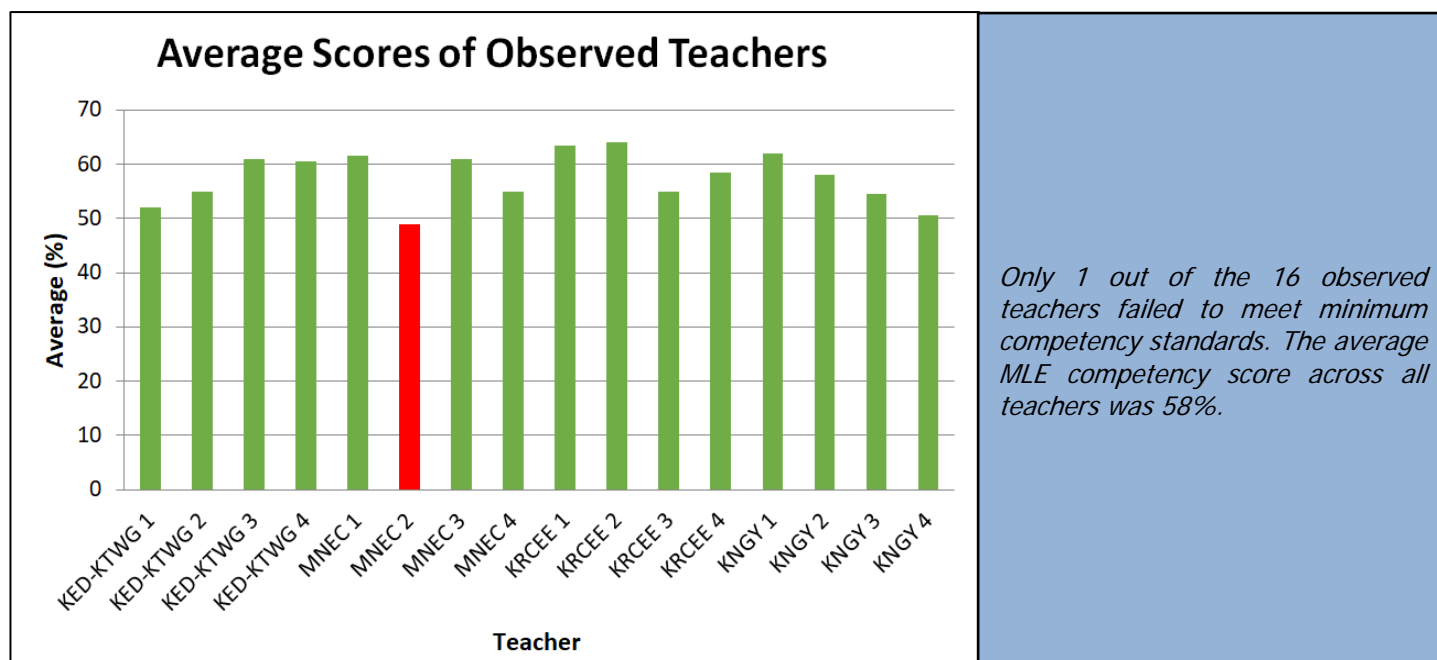
Teachers were scored using a 200-point MLE competency rubric. Teachers were considered to meet competency standards if they achieved an average score of 50% across all competencies.

## RESULTS

**Overall: 94 % of observed ethnic and refugee teachers were proficient in MLE competencies**

### Domain A: Professional Knowledge and Understanding

All teachers were found to use both L1 and L2 to expand student understanding. Students were able to discuss and ask questions in the language most comfortable to them which allowed for increased dialogue and participate

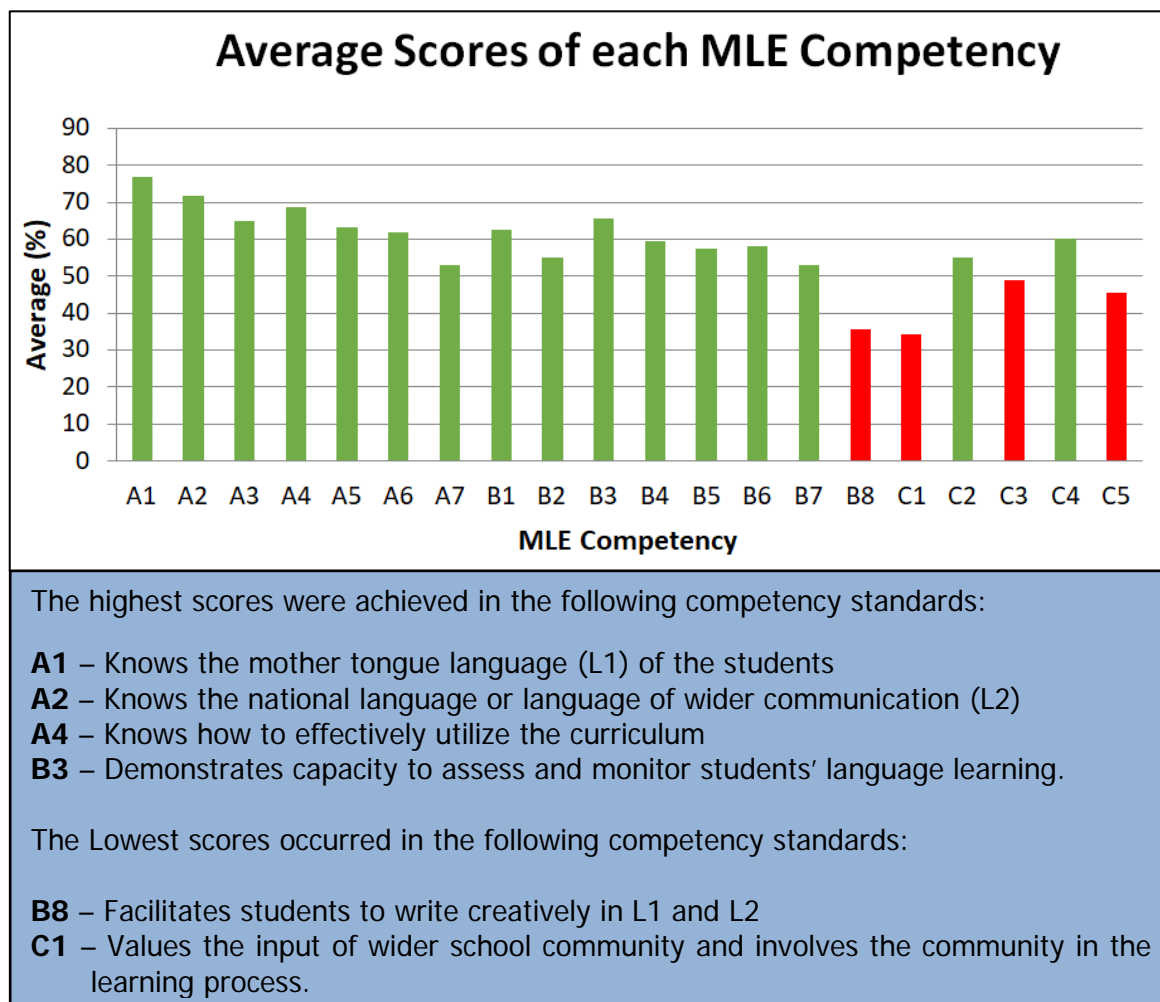


## Domain B: Professional Skills and Practices

Teachers were effectively able to use a language assessment during their lesson to identify student language levels and needs. It was observed that teachers took advantage of shared languages with the students to incorporate local culture and student backgrounds into their lessons. Teachers used a step-by-step approach when introducing new vocabulary or concepts. For example, some teachers introduced new concepts in L1 first to develop student understanding, and then reviewed the new vocabulary in L2.

## Domain C: Professional Values and Dispositions

The highest achieving competency related to the use of positive reinforcement where teachers enabled students to express their ideas in L1 if they were not yet comfortable in the L2. When students made mistakes in L2, many teachers responded by scaffolding in the students' L1.



## LIMITATIONS

Overall, it was observed that teachers were able to demonstrate multilingual competencies to support student understanding, however, it was difficult to observe the competencies related to teachers promoting or advocating for MTB-MLE in the classroom. It is recommended that for standards pertaining to community involvement and advocacy, that evidence be collected by asking teachers post-lesson reflection questions instead of scoring based on classroom observations. If the teachers have the opportunity to share their involvement through an interview, it would allow them to share how they formally and informally advocate for multilingual education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Children learn best in their Mother Tongue language and having a foundation in L1 supports the learning of L2<sup>2</sup>. It was found that observed teachers were competent in demonstrating professional knowledge, understanding, skills and practices. Based on these findings, we believe that ethnic and refugee teachers, the systems they are supported by and most importantly, the children they serve, should be recognized through inclusive national language policy and continued support from wider stakeholders in education in Myanmar.

### Recommendations for Education Policymakers and Implementers

1. Work to further clarify language policy implementation to ensure consistent procedures are used across regions. Multiple languages of instruction should be permitted for children from non-Myanmar speaking backgrounds.
2. Recognize the existing community-trained teachers by providing a flexible pathway for them to become accredited and supported by the State Education Department. Example flexible pathways could include:
  - a) *Certified training programs for teaching assistants or paraprofessionals that are fluent in L1 and L2*
  - b) *"Fast-track" 1 - 2 year programs allowing experienced community or refugee teachers to gain accreditation, or*
  - c) *Twinning programs with existing indigenous pre-service colleges*
3. Take collaborative steps towards joint education management and administration between state and non-state education providers, such as joint recruitment, training and deployment of teachers.
4. Continue to provide teaching and learning aids for MLE teachers and students. Continue to consult local education service providers and language and culture committees when creating new language learning resources and ensure new resources are translated correctly.
5. Collaborate with Ethnic Education Service Providers for the provision of teachers for indigenous language and culture and classes during school hours at government-supported schools rather than deploying centrally trained language teachers to teach ethnic languages.
6. Support teacher education colleges to establish MLE teacher training programs which provide space for teachers to learn respective languages and cultures as well as MLE best practices.

### Recommendations for International Stakeholders

1. Provide targeted technical support for ethnic and refugee education stakeholders. Support Refugee and Ethnic Education Service Providers to train teachers in MLE best practices and monitor the MLE competencies of their teachers.
2. Continue to provide support for Refugee and Ethnic Education Service Providers to strengthen networking and coordination with other education providers as well as state and national-level government. Support the establishment of a MTB-MLE working group among Refugee and Ethnic Education Service Providers.
3. Provide support for language experts to conduct further research on MTB-MLE best practices, create teaching and learning resources, develop orthographies for ethnic languages currently lacking them, and support Refugee and Ethnic Education Service Providers in advocating for inclusive language policy

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<sup>2</sup> See Heugh, K. (2005) Mother tongue education is best, HSRC Review Vol 3 No. 3, September 2005 and Cummins, 2001: *"The biggest predictor of success in a second language is the level of development in the mother tongue"*

